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Studying the Extent of Vitality and Endangerment of Mehri and Soqatri Languages.

Abstract: This study tries to examine the extent of vitality and endangerment of Mehri and

Soqatri language. It sheds light on the social factors that cause the endangerment of these two

languages according to the UNESCO's criteria (2003). It also tries to discuss in detail the social

factors that stand behind the endangerment of these two languages in order to find the

maintenance strategies that can protect these languages from extinction. The factors of

endangerment that are proposed by UNESCO need to be evaluated properly to guide the

linguists, parents, educators, intellectuals and the policy makers in Yemen to pay attention for

minority languages in our country. The data were collected quantitatively and the questionnaire

that is in accordance with the UNESCO's framework was implemented in Arabic language and

answered by 20 participants of Mehri speakers and 24 of Soqatri speakers. The results revealed

that both Mehri and Soqatri language are endangered, there is no difference between them and

they have the same degree of endangerment. The study recommends for establishing orthography system, written materials and uses these two languages in education at least as one subject in schools. It also recommends for specifying one our daily in official media (TV and radio) for these two languages. The government has to motivate and support the linguists for doing adequate documentation for these two languages. Mehri and Soqatri language has to be used along with Arabic language in official domains i.e. (the governmental domain in Al-Mahrah and Soqatra governorates).

Keywords: vitality, endangerment, Mehri, Soqatri.
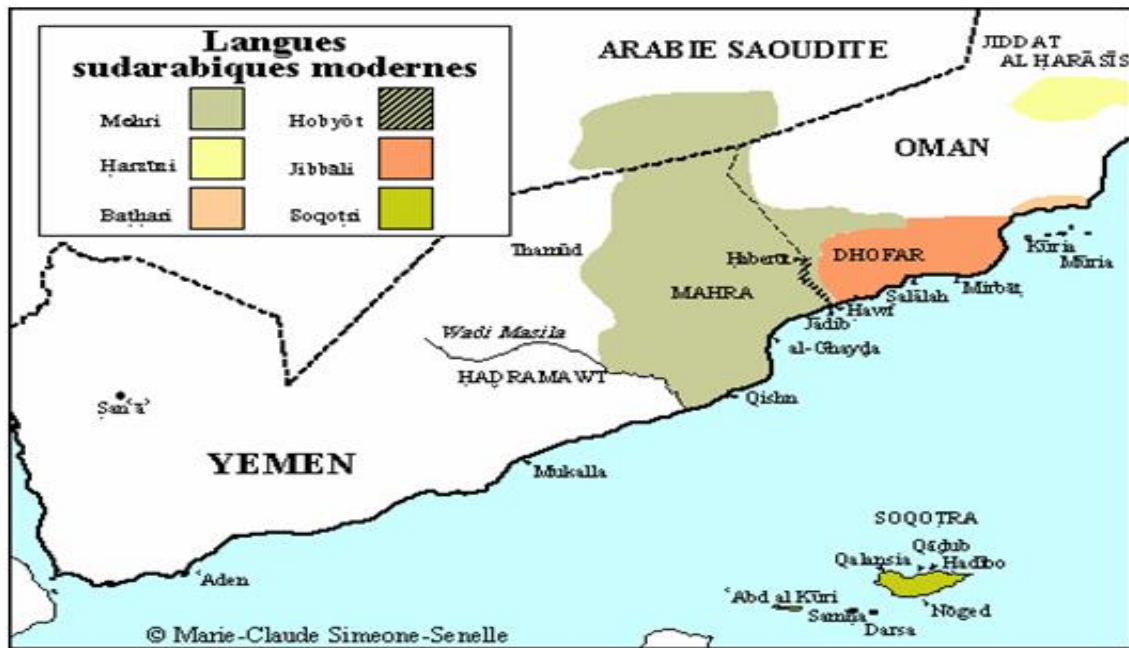
1.   Introduction

Mehri and Soqatri are the two modern south Arabian languages which refer to the Semitic language family. The Semitic family is divided into two branches west Semitic and East Semitic language family. The modern south Arabian languages are descended from the west Semitic language family, along with Ethiopian and Central Semitic languages (Rubin 2014:15). In addition, the modern south Arabian languages are divided into two groups Western MSA and Eastern MSA and there are six modern south Arabian languages within the Afro-Asiatic family, Mehri, Ḥarsusi, Baṭḥari, Hobyot, Jibbali, and Soqoṭri. Mehri, Ḥarsusi, Baṭḥari, and Hobyot belong to the western MSA and Jibbali, and Soqoṭri belong to Eastern MSA (Rubin 2014:15). So, Mehri is a westen MSA whereas Soqotri is an Eastern MSA and both belongs to the west Semitic languages.

Mehri language is spoken mainly in three areas, the eastern part of Yemen, Al-Mahrah governorate, in the western part of Oman, Dhofar state and in the desert of Alroba'a Alkhali in Saudi Arabia (Kalshat and Mirgane 2017). Soqotri language on the other hand, is spoken only

in the republic of Yemen particularly in the Island of Soqotra, the Island of Abd-alKuri, the Island of Samha, and the Island of Darsa.

There are two main dialects of Mehri language, the Mahriyōt dialect that is spoken in Yemen and Mehreyyet dialect that is spoken in Oman. Rubin (2010:1) says that "Mehri can be divided into two basic dialect groups. There is a western group spoken in Yemen, which can be called Yemeni Mehri or Southern Mehri, and there is an eastern group, which can be called Omani Mehri, Dhofari Mehri, or Nagd Mehri". Soqotri language, on the other hand, has six dialects, northern dialect, the southern dialect, the dialect that is spoken in the centre by Bedouins in the mountains, Eastern dialect, western dialect that isspoken in the Island of Samha and in the area of Qalansiya and the dialect spoken on Abd al-Kuri Island (Simeone-Senelle 2003 cited in Amani Aloufi 2016:10-11). The number of speakers of Mehri and Soqotri languages are not specific because there is no census for the speakers of these two languages neither by the officials nor by concern institutions, but the estimate number of Mehri speakers according to the UNESCO's website is 100,000 and Soqotri language is about 50,000. Mehri and Soqotri are unwritten languages and they are considered as endangered languages. This study tries to shed light on the social factors that cause the endangerment of these two languages according to the UNESCO's criteria (2003). This study aims to discuss in detail the situations that have guided and directed the linguists in UNESCO to evaluate Mehri and Soqotri languages as definitely and severely endangered.

Figure 1: Map of Modern South Arabian Languages (Simeone-Senelle 1997:381 as qtd. in AL-Mamari & Hameed 2017:243)

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1.1.   Statement of the Problem

Mehri and Soqatri are two languages used in Soqatra and Al-Mahra Governorates in the republic of Yemen. In these two governorates, Arabic is the dominant language whereas Mehri and Soqatri languages are considered as non-dominant languages. Therefore, this study tries to investigate the use of these two languages among Maheri and Sogatri people in order to identify the extent of their vitality and endangerment

1.2.   Objectives

1.   To evaluate the extent of vitality and endangerment of Mehri and Soqatri language.

2.   To assess the factors that stand behind the endangerment of Mehri and Soqatri language.

3.   To identify the similarities and differences between Mehri and Soqotri language in respect of their vitality and endangerment.

1.3.   Methodology

The UNESCO's framework is used for this survey. It is implemented as a questionnaire to collect the data. The questionnaire is answered by 20 participants of Mehri speakers and 24 of

Soqatri speakers. The data were collected quantitvelly using the UNESCO's framework which was translated to Arabic language and then carried out in Arabic language.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Vitality and Endangerment of Language

Ying et al. (2015: 121) say "the concept of language vitality focuses on the language component rather than other group variables as its chief characteristic. It is defined as the degree to which language will live and survive". There are approximately 6000 languages are spoken in the world, 2579 are classified as endangered languages (Moseley 2010 as qtd. in Kirmizi 2015:1). The endangered language is the language that is going to be extinct in the future because of some social factors such as reducing in the number of speakers, the shift from one language to the other by the speakers as shifting from the minority language to the dominant one, or because of political, economic, cultural or environmental factors, etc. According to the report of (UNESCO, 2003) "Language endangerment may be the result of external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation, or it may be caused by internal forces, such as a community's negative attitude towards its own language". Sueyoshi et al. (2005:23) say the term endangerment "refers to a process that begins subtly by decreasing use of a language, yet ultimately leading to the "death" of that language". The endangerment is almost related to the spoken languages i.e. the unwritten languages in the world. As in (UNESCO, 2003), 'A language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it. Use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains and cease to pass it from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, adults or children'.

According to Batibo (2005:62) the term endangerment "denotes a language that is threatened by extinction. The threat may come because the pool of speakers is declining rapidly to small numbers, because the younger generations are not learning to speak it, or because the domains in which the language is used have shrunk so much that it is not used regularly in the language

community". Batibo states that the speakers of the weaker language have to resist the pressure of the stronger language in order to avoid the language endangerment. In this case, Batibo (2005:63-64) proposes three possible scenarios for language endangerment:

1.   If the degree of pressure from the stronger language is greater than the resistance offered, the weaker language is highly endangered.

2.   If the amount of resistance by the weaker language is greater than the pressure from the stronger language, the weaker language is not in danger.

3.   If the weaker language speakers see many advantages in joining the community of the stronger language speakers, they may not resist at all but abandon their language in favour of the other as a strategy for integration.

Brenzinger (1992) argues that the endangerment of the language is not determined by the few number of speakers but by the attitudes of the speakers of that language. If the speakers consider a language as a valuable language, they will do their best to preserve it, but if they consider a language as unimportant or not useful they will shift to use another language (Brenzinger 1992 as qtd. in Bello 2013:33). In brief, the language endangerment occurs due to some factors overlap together causes the endangerment of a language.

2.1. The UNESCO's Model for Measuring the Vitality and Endangerment of Languages

At the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO (2003) Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages a framework of nine factors proposed to measure the vitality and the state of endangerment of languages. The nine factors are the following:

1.   Intergenerational language transmission;

2.   Absolute numbers of speakers;

3.   Proportion of speakers within the total population;

4.   Loss of existing language domains;

5.   Response to new domains and media;

6.   Materials for language education and literacy;

7.   Governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies;

8.   Community members' attitudes towards their own language; and

9.   Amount and quality of documentation.

2.   Analysis and Discussion

The data is collected using the questionnaire which is in compliance with UNESCO's criteria, where there are nine factors that can cause the language endangerment. The analysis of the data will go through that nine factors starting with the intergenerational language transmission and ending with the amount and quality of documentation.

2.1.   Factor 1: Intergenerational Language Transmission

According to UNESCO (2003) the number 5 means that "the language is spoken by all generations. There is no sign of linguistic threat from any other language, and the intergenerational transmission of the language seems uninterrupted".

Table 1: Intergenerational language transmission

Degree of Endangerment	Grade	Speaker Population	Mehri language		Soqatri language	
			frequency	percentage	fequency	percentage
safe	5	The language is used by all ages, from children up.	17	85%	20	83,2%
unsafe	4	The language is used by some children in all domains; it is used by all children in limited domains			1	4,2%

definitely endangered	3	The language is used mostly by the parental generation and up.	3	15%	1	4,2%
severely endangered	2	The language is used mostly by the grandparental generation and up.			1	4,2%
critically endangered	1	The language is used mostly by very few speakers, of greatgrandparental generation.			1	4,2%
extinct	0	There exists no speaker.				
Total			20	100%	24	100%

In the table (1) results revealed that 85% of Mehri participants (17 of 20 participants) say that Mehri language is used by all ages, from children up. And according to Soqatri participants, 83% of them (20 of 24 of participants) say that Soqatri language is used by all ages, from children up. For UNESCO's criteria (2003) the language is in danger if it is not transmitted from one generation to the next or if the speakers cease to use it or cease to pass it from one generation to the next. The data in the table 1 shows that both Mehri and Soqatri language are save because these two languages are still used by the generation and there is a transition for these languages from one generation to the other. Mehri and Soqatri language is in grade number 5 which means

that they are safe. The results in the table 1 also shows that 15 % of participants in Mehri say that the language is spoken only by parents, similarly in soqatri language 17,2% of participants say that the language is spoken only by parents or grandparents. This means that there are some families have stopped transfer these two languages to their children. These results reveal that there is a small threat regarding the transition of these languages from one generation to the other.

2.2.   Factor 2: Absolute Number of Speakers

The number of speakers of these two languages is neither determined by the government nor by any other institutions. There is no census for the speakers of Mehri and Soqatri language, but according to UNESCO Document (2003) the estimate number of speakers for Mehri language is 100,000 and Soqatri language is 50,000. The number of population of Al-Mahrah governorate is 88594 and Soqatra governorate is 32285. Mehri language is also spoken in the western part of Oman, Dhofar state and in the desert of Alroba'a Alkhali in Saudi Arabia. So, it can be said that the estimate number of speakers of these two languages is true. The language that is used in small community is in danger and the people of that language may be assimilated with a huge neighboring community using its language. Mehri and Soqatri language are spoken in small community due to the estimate number of speakers and they are assimilated with the Arbian speech community. Therefore, these two languages are in danger.

2.3.   Factor 3: Proportion of Speakers within the Total Population

UNESCO Document (2003:9) says that "The number of speakers in relation to the total population of a group is a significant indicator of language vitality, where "group" may refer to the ethnic, religious, regional, or national group with which the speaker community identifies".

Table 2: Proportion of speakers within the total population

Degree of	Grade		Mehri language	Soqatri language

Endangerment		Proportion of Speakers Within the Total Reference Population	frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage
safe	5	All speak the language.	2	10%	14	58,3%
unsafe	4	Nearly all speak the language.	15	75%	7	29,2%
definitively endangered	3	A majority speak the language.	3	15%	3	12,5%
severely endangered	2	A minority speak the language.				
critically endangered	1	Very few speak the language.				
extinct	0	None speak the language.				
Total			20	100%	24	100%

The data in the table 2 shows that both Mehri and Soqatri language are unsafe. The language must receive a grade 5 to be classified as safe. 80% of Mehri participants selected 4 and 3, for this result, one can say that Mehri language falls within grade 4 and considered as unsafe. Similarly, 41, 7% of Soqatri participants selected 3 and 4 grade, so Soqatri language cannot be evaluated as safe.

2.4.   Trends in Existing Language Domains

Grade number 5 means that the language has a universal use. It is used in all domains and for all purposes. Grade number 4 means that there is a multilingual parity between two languages in the community i.e. each language is used in different domains and for different functions in the community UNESCO Document (2003: 9).

Table 3: Trends in Existing Language Domains

Grade	Domains and functions	Mehri language		Soqatri language	
		frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage
5	The language is used in all domains and for all functions	6	30%	8	33,3%
4	Two or more languages may be used in most social domains and for most functions.	13	65%	11	45,8%
3	The language is in home domains and for many functions, but the dominant			2	8,3%

	language begins to penetrate even home domains.				
2	The language is used in limited social domains and for several functions			3	12,5%
1	The language is used only in a very restricted domains and for a very few functions	1	5%		
0	The language is not used in any domain and for any function.				
Total		20	100%	24	100%

In the table 3, the majority of responses fall in grade 5 and 4. Both Mehri and Soqatri language can be evaluated as multilingual parity languages. These two languages are used along with Arabic language in different domains. Arabic language is the official language, the language of government and education whereas Mehri and Soqatri are used in different domains such as at homes, public places, and they may use with Arabic language for specific purposes. Arabic language is the dominant language where Mehri and Soqatri are non-dominant languages but there is coexistence between these languages. According to UNESCO Document (2003:9), "The coexistence of the dominant and non-dominant languages results in speakers' using each language for a different function (diglossia), whereby the non-dominant language is used in

informal and home contexts and the dominant language is used in official and public contexts.

Speakers may consider the dominant language to be the language of social and economic".

2.5.   Factor 5: Response to New Domains and Media

 The vitality of language can be measured according to the new domains in which the language

is used such as the media (Television, Radio) and internet. The two languages Mehri and Soqatri

are neither used in education nor in media (radio and television). Bello (2013:90) says "Social

networks such as the internet and other electronic media (radio and television) are very powerful

domains for disseminating and acquiring knowledge. If a language is used in such new domains,

vitality is enhanced". According to the UNESCO document (2003:10) "If the communities do

not meet the challenges of modernity with their language, it becomes increasingly irrelevant and

stigmatized".

Table 4: Response to New Domains and Media

Degree of endangerment	Grade	New Domains and Media Accepted by the Endangered Language	Mehri language		Soqatri language	
			frequency	percentage	frequency	percentage
dynamic	5	The language is used in all new domains.	4	20%	3	12,5%
robust/active	4	The language is used in most new domains.			2	8,3%

receptive	3	The language is used in many domains.				
coping	2	The language is used in some new domains.			1	4,2%
minimal	1	The language is used only in a few new domains.	13	65%	4	16,7%
inactive	0	The language is not used in any new domains.	3	15%	14	58,3%
Total			20	100%	24	100%

The questions that are included in the questionnaire were regarding the use of Mehri and Soqatri in the new domains of social networks such as facebook and wahtsapp. In the table 4 the results reveal that both Mehri and Soqatri language are not used widely in the new domians such as whatapp and Facebook and also it is not used neither in education nor in media (radio and television) completely. The use of Mehri and Soqatri language in new domains i.e. social media can be evaluated as minimal and inactive respectively. This means that the extent of vitality of these two languages is weak and they are in danger.

2.6.   Factor 6: Materials for Language Education and Literacy

Education in the non-dominate language is one of the most important factors for the language vitality. There are no written materials for Mehri and Soqatri language. These two languages do

not have orthography at all. There are only a few researches have been conducted on these two languages. These researches are not written in Mehri or Soqatri language but in English or Arabic language. In Al-Mahrah and Soqatra governorates, Arabic is the language of education and administration. Books and materials are needed and necessary for the vitality of these languages. Books have to be written by the linguists and educationists to be suitable for all ages and for different language abilities. Some materials on all topics for learning Mehri and Soqatri have to be added in schools and universities as at least one paper for each semester in schools.

Table 5: Materials for Language Education and Literacy

Statement	Mehri language			Soqatri langauage		
	Yes	No	Total	Yes	No	Total
The language (ML, SL) is not a written language and it is not used for writing in any domains.	90%	10%	100%	87,5 %	12,5	100%
	18	2	20	21	3	24
Arabic is the language of education and writing in all domains.	95%	5%	100%	95%	5%	100%
	19	1	20	23	1	24

2.7.   Factor 7: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, Including Official Status and Use.

In table 6 it's clear that there is no explicit policy for Mehri and Soqatri language; Arabic language prevails in the public domain. The Yemeni government has no policy for protecting Mehri and Soqatri language. Both Mehri and Soqatri language falls in grade two which indicates passive assimilation. In the table 6 the results show that 70% perecent of Mehri people and 50% of Soqatri people say that there is no explicit policy exists for their languages. According to UNESCO's document (2003:13) passive assimilation means that "The dominant group is indifferent as to whether or not minority languages are spoken, as long as the dominant group's

language is the language of interaction. Though this is not an explicit language policy, the dominant group's language is the de facto official language. Most domains of non-dominant language use do not enjoy high prestige".

Table 6: Governmental and Institutional Language Attitudes and Policies, Including Official Status and Use.

Degree of Support	Grade	Official Attitudes toward Language	Mehri		Soqatri	
equal support	5	All languages are protected.	1	5%	3	12,5%
differentiated support	4	Minority languages are protected primarily as the language of the private domains. The use of the language is prestigious.				
passive assimilation	3	No explicit policy exists for minority languages; the dominant language prevails in the public domain.	14	70%	14	58,3%
active assimilation	2	Government encourages assimilation to the dominant language. There is no protection for minority languages.	3	15%	3	12,5%
forced assimilation	1	The dominant language is the sole official language, while non-dominant languages are	2	10%	4	16,7%

		neither recognized nor protected.							
prohibition	0	Minority languages are prohibited.							
Total								24	100%

2.8. Factor 8: Community Members' Attitudes toward Their Own Language

Attitudes of the community towards their language play an important role in the vitality and endangerment of the non-dominant languages. The positive attitudes towards the non-dominant language enhance the vitality of the language, whereas the negative or indifferent attitude towards the non-dominate language means that the language is on the way to extinction. This table which is in accordance with UNESCO's criteria and Likert scale measurment is used as a simple sample for the people's attitudes towards Mehri and Soqatri language. There are only four choices are given for the participants (Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree) where two choices are considered as agree and two are considered as disagree. The results show that both Mehri and Soqatri people have appositive attitude towards their non-dominant languages. They wish to see their languages promoted and all of them support the language maintenance. The results also show that few members are indifferent or do not care about Mehri and Soqatri language preferring the use of Arabic language, but as long as the Majority have positive attitude towards their language, this means that the community will resist the pressure of the Arabic language in order to avoid the language endangerment.

Table 7: Community Members' Attitudes toward Their Own Language

NO	Community Members' Attitudes toward Language	Mehri language				Soqatri language			
		SA	A	D	SD	SA	A	D	SD

1	All Mehri/ Soqatri people value their language and wish to see it promoted.	75%	25%			75%	12,5%	12,5%	
	All Mehri/ Soqatri people support language maintenance.	70%	30%			75%	12,5%	12,5%	
2	Many members support Mehri/ Soqatri language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.	45%	20%	25%	10%	20,8%	29,2%	37,5%	12,5%
3	Only a few members support Mehri/ Soqatri language maintenance; others are indifferent or may even support language loss.	5%	25%	45%	25%	8,3%	25%	37,5%	29,2%
4	No one cares if the Mehri/ Soqatri	5%	25%	35%	35%	8,3%	16,7%	45,8%	29,2%

language is lost; all prefer to use a Arabic language.								

2.9.   Factor 9: Type and Quality of Documentation

According to UNESCO (2003:16) the language should have "written texts, including transcribed, translated and an-notated audiovisual recordings of natural speech" to be evaluated as a vital language. Mehri and Soqatri language have some documents. They have only few grammatical sketches, short word-lists, and some texts useful for linguistic research but with inadequate coverage. The audio and video recordings are not available for Mehri and Soqatri language. There are also some researches, papers, dissertations and thesis conducted by some researchers on these two languages. According to UNESCO's criteria it can be claimed that these two languages fall in grade 2 that means the nature of documentation for the language is "fragmentary".

3.   Conclusion

Mehri and Sogatri are the two non-dominant Yemeni languages used by a few number of speakers in two governorates in Yemen. Building on UNESCO's framework, it was revealed that the two languages are used by all ages, from children up, but not all people speak the two languages. The number of speakers of Mehri language is more than Soqatri language and both languages have few speakers. Mehri and Soqatri language are used along with Arabic language in different domains and for different functions. In response to new domains such as social media (whatsapp and facebook) Mehri language is used in few new domains whereas Soqatri is not used in any new domain. Mehri and Soqatri are unwritten languages where Arabic is the language of education and writing in all domains. There is no material for these two languages and the nature of documentation is "fragmentary" and inadequate. Speakers of these two

languages have a positive attitude towards their languages but there is no explicit policy from the Yemeni government for protecting these languages from extinction. Both languages are endangered and for enhancing the vitality of these two languages the following steps must be taken into consideration 1) establishing the orthography that can contribute in the developing of the two languages 2) Making written materials for the two languages 3) Using the two languages in education at least as one subject in schools and universities 4) motivating and supporting the linguists to do the adequate documentation for these two languages 5) specifying at least one hour in the official media for these two languages daily 6) Using Mehri and Soqatri along with Arabic language in the official domains i.e. the governmental domain.

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